CHAPTER 1

The Nature of Sociological Theory

Maturity of any science depends on the organization of its theories. Organisation and interpretation of the theories require, logical and systematic explanation of the methods used. As we all know it is the curiosity of the human mind that forms the basis of development of a science. As a result of this curiosity scientists are able to establish cause and effect relationships. Once the cause and effect relationship has been established, attempt is made to explain and interpret it. This leads to the formulation of a scientific theory. In other words, a theory is formulated after the collection, classification and interpretation of available data. A theory is said to be correct if it stands the test and trial of research.

Meaning and definition of sociological theory – Sociology studies the social interactions between various members of the society. And as a science it requires formulation of theories.

Social thinkers and social scientists like Fairchild, Bogardus, Sorokin have defined sociological theory in different ways. Generally, sociological theory as an empirical generalisation is based on facts, on the basis of which, social phenomenon can be explained. But theory has to be realistic, logical and universally acceptable. When we describe reality on the basis of a theory, it is known as theoretical knowledge. It is also called 'Theoretical Concepts'.

In spite of these basic elements, there is difference of opinion amongst sociologists in regard to the definition and meaning of a sociological theory. Pitrim Sorokin has linked sociological theory with sociological schools and approaches while Bogardus recognises only universal theories as authentic. But Merton has followed a middle path known as the 'Middle range theory'.

Theory construction in Sociology – Formation of sociological

theories has followed different processes. According to Max Weber, for the formulation of a sociological theory, a sociologist should be equipped with the capacity to experiment. It also includes the process of research. According to Lazarsfield, the development of a sociological theory must follow the following steps:

(1) Formulation of the problem,
(2) Classification of meaning and concepts,
(3) Structure of arguments,
(4) Systematic evidence.

It would be proper if we study all these steps in detail.

(1) **Formulation of the problem** – As a first step, we should formulate the problem after having assessed, its nature and scope.

(2) **Classification, meaning and concepts** – The technical terms used in the process must be properly defined. Every word used should indicate a definite phenomenon. For example, the term 'crime' indicates a particular social event.

(3) **Structure of arguments** – In research, definite arguments have to be put forward in collaboration of a statement. Different types of concepts are formed as a result of one theory. Hypotheses, concepts, laws etc., formulate certain theories. Every concept should be logical and based on scientific argument.

Systematic evidence – For every sociological theory, there has to be evidence. Unless the evidences are based on facts, they shall not be stable. These evidences should be borne as a result of the experimentation.

Views of Merton in regard to the formation of sociological theory – Merton has also laid down certain steps in regard to the process of formation of sociological theory. These steps are:

(1) Methodology,
(2) General psychological orientation,
(3) Analysis of concepts,
(4) Interpretation of the data,
(5) Generalisations,
(6) Theorisation.

In the following lines these steps have been described in detail:

(1) **Methodology** – In research different methods are employed for collection of data. It is therefore necessary to discuss these methods, before the actual process starts. The methodology should be in conformity with the subject matter.

(2) **General sociological orientation** – In the process of development, hypotheses are employed, and on the basis of these hypotheses, it is possible to analyse the social data or facts. For example, Pitrim Sorokin has presented his theories about 'materialistic' and 'idealistic' culture. These hypotheses, when developed, can help in the study of the development of the sociological theory.

(3) **Analysis of sociological concepts** – In the process of formulating a sociological theory, concepts are used. In order to avoid confusion, these concepts have to be properly analysed. Social distance, social class, stratification etc, are different concepts which have scientific meanings that are different from what we understand by these terms in general. It does not mean that analysis of the concepts or concept is necessary for formulation of a theory. According to Merton, analysis of concepts is helpful in the clarification of the ideas and thoughts that the investigator uses in his process of research. According to Merton, "If concepts selected are such that no relationship between them is obtained, the research will be sterile no matter how meticulous the subsequent observations and inferences".

(4) **Interpretation of data** – We have already talked about the collection of data. But mere collection of data is not enough for formulating a theory. The collected data has to be properly interpreted, so that useful generalisations may be drawn. These collections and generalisations are helpful in the formulation of theory.

(5) **Generalisations** – On the basis of the interpretation of data and the experimentation carried out in regard to the collected data, general principles or generalisations are formulated. The process of formulation of general principles is known as 'Generalisation'. These generalisations are considered to be universal and recognised as true under different conditions. But

Merton has presented 'Middle-range Theory' also in this respect.

(6) **Theorisation** – Once the generalisation has become universally accepted or it has withstood the test under different circumstances, it is recognised as theory. Theory is invariably based on facts and reasons.

All these things show that formulation of a theory has to be preceded by certain studies and processes. Through these steps, attempt is made to find out the truth and assess the reality. We call these sociological processes as 'concepts'. When on the basis of these concepts we arrive at some factual knowledge, we have a theory.

A few important definitions of sociological theory are given below:

1. **Parsons:** A theoretical system in the present sense is a body of logically interdependent generalized concepts of empirical reference. Such a system tends, ideally, to become logically closed, to reach such a state of logical integration that every logical implication of any combination of propositions in the system is explicitly stated in some other propositions in the same system.

2. **Merton:** The term sociological theory refers to logically interconnected sets of propositions from which empirical uniformities can be derived.

3. **Thomos Ward:** A theory is a logical deductive – inductive system of concepts, definitions, and propositions which states a relationship between two or more selected aspects of phenomena from which testable hypotheses can be derived.

The position that is empirically verifiable, law – like propositions alone constitute a sociological theory, is open to question. And, how many law - like propositions are there in sociology? Again, should all theoretical propositions be supported by evidence?

The available scholarship in sociological theory does not require that every social theory be empirically verifiable in the rigorous fashion of the physical sciences. Social contract theory, social Darwinism, the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, Marxian theory of class war, Sorokin's theory of social and cultural dynamics, Parson's theory of social action, and Durkheim's theory of religion have been

influential sociological theories although none of them can be veri-fied in their entirety. And if these are not theories, what are they?

A theory is a plausible explanation about social phenomena, or a class of social phenomena, logically construed and systematically organized, that underscores the relationship between two well-defined variables. It is more than a hypothesis or speculative reason-ing but far from a social law that is supported by evidence. A theory is thus constructed with a fact, law and practice. A fact is an empiri-cally verifiable observation whereas a theory is a systematized rela-tionship between facts. In short, a theory is a symbolic construction and theory building is a matter of creative achievement. A theory is thus an abstract conceptual scheme that reaches out beyond itself, transcending the observable realm of empirical reality into a higher level of abstraction by means of a symbolic construction. In this sense, it stands for the symbolic dimension of experience, as opposed to the apprehension of brute fact.

To summarize, a sociological theory may be said to have the fol-lowing characteristics:

1. A theory is couched in terms of well defined concepts and logi-cally inter-connected proposition.

2. A theory is a systematized symbolic construction and does not share the ineluctability of fact. Theory building is a creative achievement and involves a qualitative jump beyond evidence.

3. A theory is provisional in character; it is always open to revision depending on new insights and evidences. It is neither neces-sary nor desirable for a sociological theory to be a final formu-lation.

4. It is verifiable in a preliminary way, that is, consistent with the body of known facts and available evidences.

5. It is a systematized formulation that seeks to reconcile the needs of a humanistic tradition (speculative, creative etc.) with the demands of a scientific tradition (measurement, rigorous induction, predictive power etc.)

Types of Sociological Theories

In a volume entitled 'Modern Sociological Theory', Boskoff

refers to two types of social theory: non-social, reductionist explanations of social phenomena with reference to environmental and physical factors as well as natural forces (e.g., geographic determinism), and 'photo-sociology', which was marked by 'a growing emancipation from most of the concepts and orientations of the physical and biological sciences' and is 'conceived as an intellectual synthesis of data and generalizations supplied by the specialized social disciplines.'

Helmut Wagner classifies sociological theory into three main categories:

1.   Positive sociological theories, whose authors consider sociology as a natural science, neo-positivism, human ecology, structural functionalism, social behaviourism and bio-psychological theory of culture fall in this category.

2.   Interpretative sociologies, whose authors consider, or actually trust, sociology as a social science. Theories of cultural understanding, interpretative social psychology and social phenomenology represent this class of sociological theories.

3.   Non-scientific or evaluative social theories, whose authors neither value nor consider nor actually treat sociology as positive or interpretative science. The examples are social-philosophical theory, ideological social theory and humanitarian reform theory.

However, the value of attempts to classify sociological theories as reductionist and non-reductionist, or evaluative and scientific is highly questionable. Therefore, using three general criteria, let us differentiate between three alternative schemes of classification.

Speculative vs. Grounded Theories

Speculative theory refers to an abstract impressionable approach rooted in the philosophical system. A speculative theory corresponds to a conceptual ordering whereas grounded theory corresponds to an empirical generalization, the former generates a host of assumptions, philosophical and methodological, as well as theoretical entities and conceptual schema; the letter produces specific sociological laws, principles and empirical generalizations.

Speculative theories usually give rise to theoretical laws, and grounded theories to empirical laws. Speculative theories usually rely on historical method whereas grounded theories make use of positive method and mathematical procedures.

Grand Theory vs. Miniature Theory

A grand theory is a broad conceptual scheme with systems of interrelated propositions that provide a ground frame of reference for the study of social processes and institutions. It differs from speculative theory in that its propositions are somewhat enclosed – although not solidly – in the empirical world, whereas the propositions emanating from the speculative theories are essentially assumptions rooted in the philosophical system. The difference is only a matter of degree, not of kind. A grand theory is a comprehensive formulation generating a host of propositions and provides a master scheme of general sociological orientations. Parsons' general system theory and Sorokin's theory of socio-cultural dynamics are examples of grand theories.

Miniature theories are partial theories, rather than inclusive theories. They are what Merton calls 'theories of the middle range: theories intermediate to the minor working hypothesis evolved in abundance during the day-to-day routines of research, and the all inclusive speculations comprising a master conceptual scheme from which it is hoped to derive a very large number of empirically observed uniformities of social behavior'. They are more specific and their frame of reference is considerably limited. They are less pretentious than the high sounding all - inclusive grand theories. Merton's theory of anomie, Homan's theory of elementary social behaviour and Pareto's theory of circulation of the elites are examples of theories of the middle range.

Macro vs. Micro Theories

Macro theories are broader in scope and encompass an extended range of laws. Micro theories have a narrow frame of reference and focus on a limited range of phenomena. The early masters of social thought were almost exclusively concerned with grand, cosmic issues or total societal patterns. Theories of society, culture and institutions constitute the tradition of macro – sociology and Emile Durkheim is its major exponent.

Micro – SOCIOLOGY is concerned with 'interactions among the atoms of sociology'; and German sociologists like Weber and Simmel are its principal architects. Psychological reductionism, role theory and small group theories represent the micro - tradition in contemporary sociology. The distinction between the two types of theories is based on the size of the unit of analysis rather than the level of analysis. Macro theories, for example, study the factory as a social system; micro theories, on the other hand, seek to analyse workers' behaviour within the industrial establishment. The former delineate the social structure; the latter explain social roles and individual behavior that mediates the structure. Macro theories deal with society as a whole; micro theories deal with sub-systems that make up the whole. Parsons' general systems theory is of the molar type whereas Homans's exchange theory is of the molecular type. Macro theories are a species of grand theories and can be verified only in a preliminary fashion. Micro theories belong to the tribe of the miniature theories and can be 'tested' in the 'scientific' sense. This is why many scientists claim that micro theories are intrinsically more satisfactory and fruitful in the pursuit of scientific inquiry.

However, society is more than an aggregate of individuals because of the qualitative jump involved in the transformation of the unit into the system. There are many sociological phenomena for which molecular theories cannot provide any satisfactory explanation because of the multiplicity of the variables included and the complexity of their interrelationships. Hence, we choose between types of theories depending on the social phenomena and the range of variables involved.

Functions of Theories

The major functions of sociological theories may be summarized as follows:

1. Theory suggests potential problems and produces new investigative studies. A fruitful theory is a storehouse of meaningful hypotheses and a continuous source of inspiration to the process of sociological inquiry. And many empirical investigations lead to theory - building just as they proceed from well - formulated theories.

2. Theory predicts facts, based on intuitive knowledge, historical

analysis and observation of social uniformities, a theoretical system often provides a secure ground for prediction.

3. Theory systematizes matters and their relationships into convenient conceptual schema. Not only does it explain observed regularities and social uniformities, it also simplifies laws and establishes order in categories of facts. Theory summarizes relationships between variables in a conceptual framework.

4. Theory establishes a linkage between specific empirical findings and general sociological orientations, thus enhancing the meaningfulness.

5. In providing meaning, the theory also attests to truth. A hypothesis may be as much confirmed by fitting it into a theory as by fitting it into the facts. For it then enjoys the support provided by the evidence for all the other hypotheses of that theory. A theory is not only supported by established laws but also plays a part in establishing them.

6. Theory guides research and narrows down the range of facts to be studied. Theory supplies hypotheses, provides direction to the investigation and helps the researcher look for certain variables and overlook other.

7. Theory serves as a tool for inquiry. It aids in the formulation of a research design, in conducting experiments, making measurements and quantifying data.

8. Theory points to gaps in our knowledge and seeks to fill them with intuitive, impressionistic or 'extensional generalizations'. 'What is important is that laws propagate when they are united in a theory: theory serves as match maker, midwife and godfather all in one. This service is what is delicately known as the 'heuristic function of theory'.

The Myth of True Theory

In the behavioural sciences, the quest for a true theory could be a futile intellectual exercise; every theory holds some pieces to the picture puzzle of the social world. A complete picture of social phenomena emerges only through the integration of a variety of social theories.

No theory is absolutely true, for there is no absolute truth in the first place. And no theory is a final formulation because new knowledge is pouring in all the time which modifies or even repudiates existing theories. Even the theories that remain downright repudiated today had their days of glory. Unilinear evolutionary theory is a case in point. Ever since Comte expounded the theory, generations of early sociologists and to some extent, contemporary experts in modernization - have used it to describe the dynamics of evolution and progress in total societies.

A productive theory must suggest potential problems, generate fruitful hypotheses, provide new perspectives and guide sociological inquiry. In this sense, theories may very well be ends in themselves, just as they may be means to other ends.

Theoretical bias is one of the common ailments afflicting social scientists. Theoretical bias creeps in when sociologists grow too fond of a particular theory and become identified with it so deeply as to preclude considerations of other factors and perspectives. This colours their vision of the social world and they develop resistance of new areas or theories. All theories are not applicable to all situations at all times. Sociologists must choose between – sometimes conflicting – theories depending on the themes and contexts of their inquiry. The danger lies not in selective perception which is essential, but in sociologists' tendency "toward dogged intellectual loyalties, favouring one or another approach to the exclusion of all other."

Sociologists can – and must – learn to live with diversity. It is not the existence of diverse theories but their abuses that must concern us. Knowledge about social universe grows in myriad ways. A product of creative achievement and intellectual sophistication, sociological theories must reflect the thought processes of the imaginative mind.

The Role of Theory in Social Research

Robert Merton has indicated five ways in which theory influences research.

1.   **It provides general orientations:** Theory suggests potential problems and fruitful hypotheses; it points to the variables that are relevant and important and indicates the dimensions of key variables. Theory helps in the selection of cases, facts and data.

We never investigate 'all the facts' relative to the phenomena in question but only those which we think are important. This selection among the wide range of possible facts is guided by some prior notions or theories about the nature of the phenomena being studied. Admit it or not, every researcher who makes the crucial selection of cases or variables is invariably guided by their relevance to the logical structure of a theoretical scheme.

Parsons asserts that:

"The alternative for the scientist in the social or any other field is not as between theorizing and not theorizing, but as between theorizing explicitly with a clear consciousness of what he is doing with the greater opportunity that gives of avoiding the many subtle pitfalls of fallacy, and following the policy of the ostrich, pretending not to theorize and thus leaving one's theory implicit and uncriticized, thus almost certainly full of errors."

However, this position is not accepted by all. Homans, for instance, considers the claim that theory ought to guide research 'presumptuous', for, according to him, sociology does not have a 'good' theory. It is easy, he contends to suggest that researchers should investigate the effects of 'theoretically relevant variables' but the question is 'relevant to what theory?'

Of course, there are merits in Homans's argument that 'the researchers should feel not to accept theoretical guidance'. Even if the researcher allows himself to be guided by false or inadequate theories, his work may not necessarily suffer; indeed, he may benefit from it. Homans contends that good theories do not necessarily lead to good researches. However, it cannot be denied that theoretical guidance reduces the chance that the researcher will be groping in the dark and that it increases manifold the fruitfulness of research.

Theoretical consideration also enables the researcher to narrow the range of inquiry by pinpointing potentially significant and relevant variables, thereby saving time, money and other resources. What is the need for elaborate research if the existing theories can explain and predict all significant social phenomena? The reciprocal relationship between theory and research may be summarized thus: theory guides research, research goads theory.

2. **Developing sociological concepts:** Concepts are essential ingre-
    dients of theory; they specify the form and content of the vari-
    ables. Researchers translate labels into appropriate indices. For
    example, Durkheim defined different types of social integration
    conceptually but it is left to the empiricists to construct differ-
    ent indices to measure it. Similarly, Parsons's pattern variables
    have been effectively utilized in the empirical analysis of the
    process of modernization. In short, theories provide interpre-
    tive definitions of concepts, while empiricism provides opera-
    tional definitions of concepts.

3. **Furnishes *post factum* sociological interpretations:** The data
    are first collected and then selected to interpretative analysis.
    This process seeks to explain discovery, rather than test a pre-
    designated hypothesis. However, *post factum* explanations can-
    not furnish any compelling evidence, they remain at the level of
    plausibility because of the 'failure to provide distinctive tests of
    the interpretations apart from their consistency with the initial
    observations. The analysis is fitted to the facts, and there is no
    indication of just which data would be taken to contravene the
    interpretations. As a consequence, the documentary evidence
    merely illustrates rather than tests the theory.

    Curiously this is the function of theory that Homans applauds
    most: codification, or the 'strategy by which deductive systems
    are inductively arrived at.' This to him, illustrates the role of the-
    ory in organizing and systematizing empirical findings. The
    whole process of condification, according to him, centers
    around *ex-post facto* explanation. He hastens to add that there
    is nothing 'illegitimate' about *ex-post facto* explanations. 'All sci-
    ences begin with *ex-post facto* explanations and without them
    could not get off the ground'.

4. **Formulates empirical generalizations:** A major function of
    social theory in empirical research is to summarize observed
    uniformities of relationship between variables and to synthesize
    them with reference to existing conceptual schemes. It is not
    enough to state isolated propositions dealing with relationships
    between discrete facts: there must be an interpretative systhe-
    sis which seeks to compare the new findings with prevailing the-
    ories in order to understand their larger significance. Alfred

Marshall put it succinctly: 'the most reckless and treacherous of all theorists is he who professes to let the facts and figures speak for themselves'.

In a similar vein, Parsons argues that no scientifically oriented empiricist is 'content to state bald, discrete facts;' he seeks to bring forth causal relations.

The central aim of any research enterprise ought to be to test the ideas with which the research began – to elaborate, specify, modify, confirm or abandon the conceptual model that inspired the empirical work.

5. **Further development of sociological theory:** Theory prods research, and empirical findings, in turn, elaborate theory. A seemingly isolated uniformity points upto a meaningful relationship between apparently discrete variables. This leads to a modification of original conceptual framework to make allowance for new relations and patterns. Merton claims: 'By providing a rationale, the theory introduces a ground for prediction which is more secure than mere empirical extrapolation from previously observed trends... The atheoretic empiricist would have no alternative, however, but to predict on the basis of extrapolation.'

Above all, the performance of the aforesaid function makes theory more precise, and determinate, improves testability, supplies a measure of confirmation, and 'enhances the likelihood of approximating a 'crucial' observation of experiment.'

Nevertheless, there is not always the need for such an established order as a theory before research. The researcher gathers data in order to test a hypothesis or validate a theory. But the researcher may also work from data to model.

Parsons believes that all the controversy about the role of theory in social research stems from the sociologists' failure to recognize the great potential of the new brand of analytical theory: 'a body of logically inter-related generalized concepts'.

Parsons summarized the principal functions of analytical theory for research as follows:

1. In the vast welter of miscellaneous facts we face it provides us with selective criteria as to which are important and which can be safely neglected.

2. It provides a basis for coherent organization of the factual material thus selected without which a study is unintelligible.

3. It provides a basis not only of selection and organization of known facts but also reveals the gaps in our existing knowledge and their importance. It thus constitutes an important guide to the direction of fruitful research.

4. Through the mutual logical implications of different analytical systems for each other, it provides a source of cross-fertilization of related fields of the utmost importance.

To conclude, it is gratifying to note that the heat of the controversy between theorists and empiricists is cooling off. There is a growing awareness of the need for more intimate interplay between theory and research. Let us conclude with a quote from C.Wright Mills' essay, 'on intellectual craftsmanship:'

> "Be a good craftsman. Avoid any rigid set of procedures. Above all, seek to develop and to use sociological imagination. Avoid the fetishism of method and technique. Urge the rehabilitation of the unpretentious intellectual craftsman, and try to become such a craftsman yourself. Let every man be his own methodologist; let every man be his own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft. Stand for the primacy of the individual scholar; stand opposed to the ascendancy of research teams of technicians. Be one mind that is on its own confronting the problems of man and society." (C.W. Mills, The Sociological Imagination, 1970, p 24).